Five Flowers for My Father

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a new publication from the *Red Hen Press*

The core of Five Flowers for My Father *is a set of five mezzotints of wild flowers juxtaposed with objects significant in the life of Shirley Jones's father, for whom she made this book. These images together with a title page mezzotint & a mezzotint of her father were printed by her on Tervakoski handmade paper, enclosed in folders of grey Fabriano Roma printed with the text. The five narrative pieces, together with three of her poems, were set & printed by the artist in 24-point Baskerville type, in an edition limited to 40 copies. Presented in a black cloth box, with title on black leather, by Jen Lindsay.* *Price: £525*

The day my father died I felt no warmth
But walked in the shadow of the mid-day sun.
For 'Death that lays his icy hand on kings'
Had laid his hand on me. And I was chilled.

And on the journey to my mother's house
—Husband and brother chatting emptily—
And even in the hospital where he lay
—Quiet and still in the room they'd put him in—
That August sun lacked power to warm his cold
Or mine or my brother's at my side.

When they came to deliver him to the flames
A soft Welsh rain revived in his garden
The lilac and the rose. It restored the green
On Coed-y-Mwstwr, but didn't restore him.

Five Flowers for My Father

My grandmother — like my maternal grandmother — died young from overwork and self-neglect. My father went to lodge with his married sister and, for a while, could pay his way because there was still work. But in 1929, events in far-off America had repercussions in the Rhondda too. The pits closed one after the other, and my father's with them.

He began the endless round of looking for work and scrabbling on tips for small coal to keep the fires going. And he learned to eke out his dole money by doing odd jobs, finding that he could turn his hand to almost anything. My mother would say of him later, "Give him a hammer and nails and he could build a cathedral!" At this, he would shake his head, smiling, and comment, "Jack of all trades, master of none, that's me." But it wasn't for want of trying.

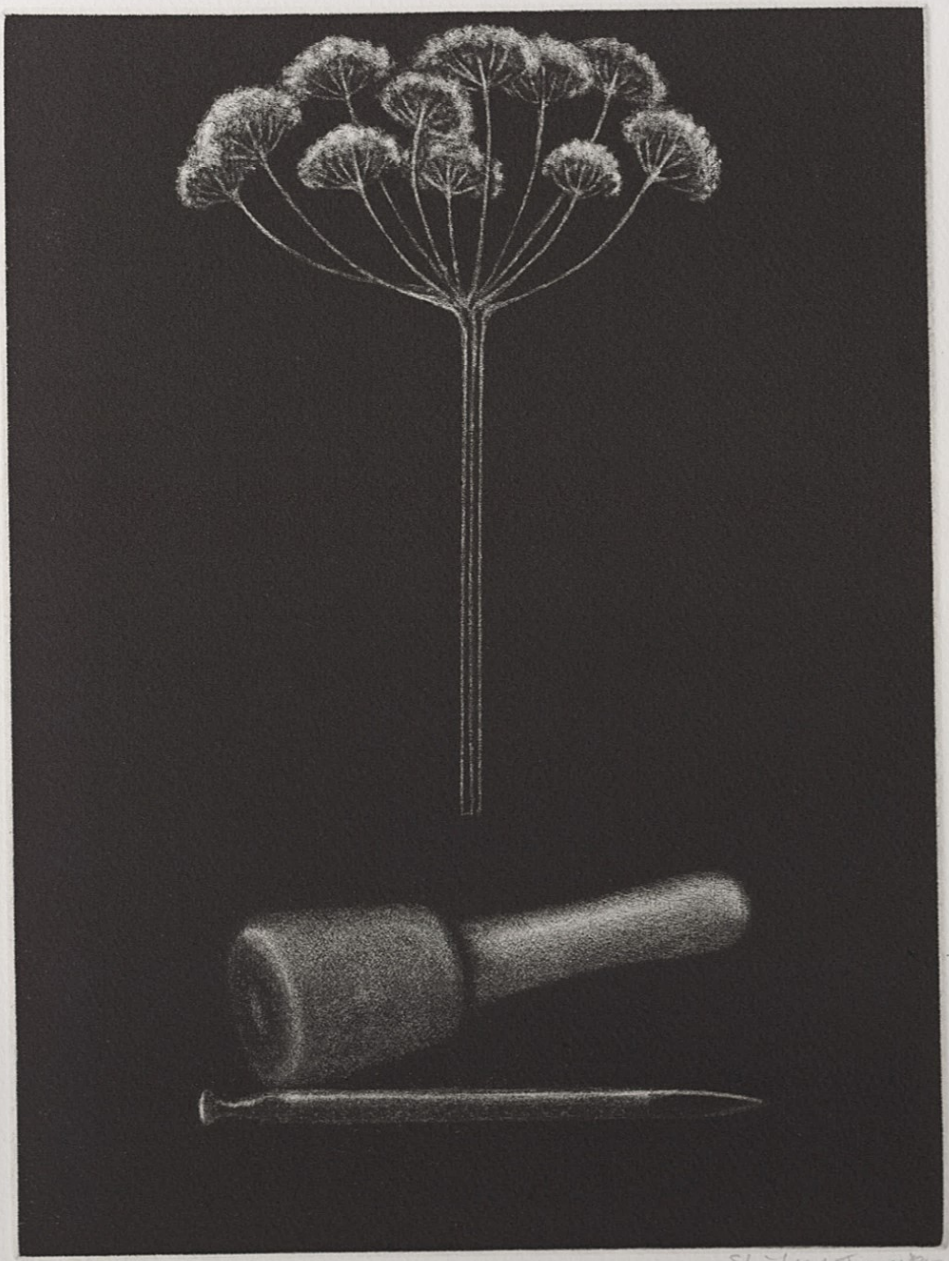
A/P

Shirley Jones '90

My father was luckier than his brothers: he was seriously ill when he was thirteen and had to spend several months in bed. It deferred for a precious year his descent down the pit and he grew almost a foot in that time, so that he was a tall man — as Welsh miners go.

While he regained his strength, he was put to work with a stone mason and learned early that he had the hands of a craftsman. Even so, he dug coal with them for five years, before he was laid off — along with many others.

Being unemployed must have been intolerable for a man as hard-working and fiercely independent as my father, but he spouted no romantic nonsense later about life underground. His memories were of oppressively narrow seams, deprivation of sunlight and the eternal cockroaches – the 'Black Pats' – in clothing and lunch box.



Shirley Jones '90

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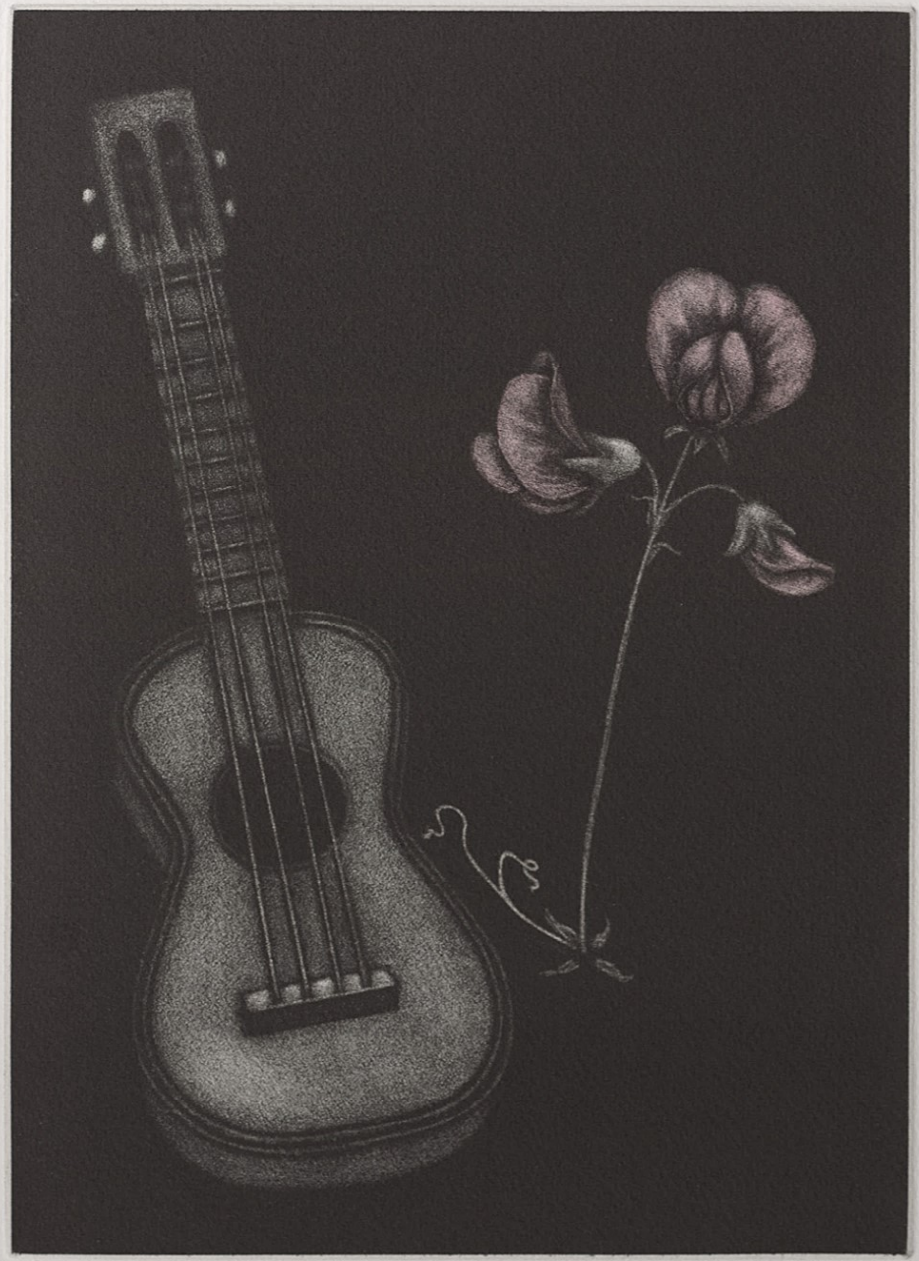
What struck my mother most when she first knew him was his amazing quietness. She came from a family who talked nonstop, were volatile, quick-tempered, emotional: very Welsh. She was also struck by his ability to turn up at whatever dance hall she had paid her hard-earned pence to get into: she was employed and knew he was not. She learned later that a sweet tenor voice and a self-taught skill with a ukulele had earned him free beers. But he sold his ukulele to pursue her with the silent determination she came to recognise as his hallmark. She must have been struck by something more in him, for she married him seven months later.

She was nineteen and he was twenty one, and when I was born, two years later, they were still on the dole. "But you never went without," my mother will declare, even now, with a kind of fierce pride. "Your father made sure of that."



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Shirley Bart '90

Eventually he was employed on the railway, as a signalman. It was, I think, the long hours of solitude in the boxes that he really relished about his job. He began to read avidly and worked his way through all that our local library could offer — from Art to Zen Buddhism. He earned the reputation along the line of being 'a deep one'. He was a good listener who could be trusted to keep to himself the private problems men brought to him. They were confidences about which even my mother was kept guessing, though she knew very well the role he served with men 'not big on Church or Chapel'.

I wrote a poem once, about this time, and offer it again as apposite.

My father's signal box was an Aladdin's cave
And he the genie of the lamps he trimmed and primed.
And in his grasp the oiled black levers rolled,
Their handles Brasso-bright and silky to the touch.
He tapped out esoteric messages on bells
To clear a truck a mile off down the line
And signal green the Passenger for Ystrad station.
And once I rode with Mr. Williams, up in front,
His face not like a miner's face, but recognisable still
Despite the constant shovelling of coal to feed the fire,
And the oily cloth he wiped his hands upon.
We watched the snaking tenements slip by
And passed my mother pegging out a line of whites,
Blued lovingly and starched, like canvases prepared to catch
The pattern of the dust stirred up as we went chugging by,
Scaring the hens in our allotment by the tracks
To send them scattering coyly off,
As though a truck had never passed their way before.
While down ahead some grey and ragged sheep made way
To let us rightful travellers by.

35/40

Shirley Jones '90

My father's allotment lay at the back of our house — a plot of sooty, bramble-infested ground below the railway embankment. All his leisure time was devoted to painting, repairing, extending and generally improving that little terraced house, which first they rented, and later owned — and cultivating his allotment. He grew vegetables, soft fruit and even flowers in that unlikely soil, and when the opportunity came, he acquired the allotment adjacent to ours. The chickens which had blighted our tiny back garden were moved to this new ground, which they duly converted into a murky desert.

Their numbers increased — and so did my father's ambitions as a poultry keeper. He exchanged hens' eggs for ducks', and even persuaded one old matriarch of a hen to accept a goose egg. She hatched out a neurotic gander, called George, whose identity complex plagued him all his short life.

Once when I was helping to pluck the chickens we sold at Christmas, I complained about the mess and the smell. My father said quietly, as he pulled out some evil-smelling entrails, 'Oh I don't mind this. It's the killing of them I can't stand.' But he cared for and killed his chickens all those years because that was the way of it.

And that was the way for us too. My parents raised me without my ever knowing that we were poor, and they gave me an education they never had. Years later my father told me sadly, but without bitterness, 'I said goodbye to my little girl the day I put you on the train at Ystrad station — the day you left for university.'

35/40

Shirley Jones '90

Death came gently to my gentle father
But not, I think, quite by surprise.
Unobtrusively he'd set his house in order
That year before he died—
Extending it and painting it.

In his last week he came to see us all—
His children and his grandchildren
(And he was not one for travelling
Far from his garden and his cat).

That last morning he breakfasted,
Washed the dishes with my mother,
Announced he had a job in hand, then
Quietly, without fuss,
Performed another task more final.

And folk say often to my mother now:
He was a gentle man. A gentleman.

Tom Pugh

1911 — 1987

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